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ABSTRACT

The paper outlines issues and needs of students who pursue psychology related careers at the bachelor's level. Issues include teaching of job skills at the undergraduate level, student maturity at the bachelor's level, the demand for clinical skills, employment prospects, traditional psychology curricula, and the extensiveness of requirements. Conclusions are that (1) students should be taught generalized skills such as interviewing, group leadership, and behavior modification techniques; (2) the key ingredient to producing a mature student is individualized supervision and coursework emphasizing professional ethics; (3) clinical training is best left at the graduate level; and (4) field experience opportunities should be available to undergraduate students. Also, the curriculum should stress analytic thinking and methodological skills for the purpose of employment enhancement and in order for the student to understand the evolving nature of psychological applications. (Author/KC)

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What Are We Preparing Our Students To Do?

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The career value of a major in Psychology has become increasingly ambiguous. Psychology continues to be a highly popular undergraduate major, with about 250,000 students reported to be majoring in the field in 1977. The ultimate goal of undergraduate Psychology majors once was continued training in a graduate Psychology program, and students continue to compete for scarce openings in graduate programs. For instance, it has been reported by Nazzaro (1976) that in 1974 there were 130,000 applications received by graduate programs for fewer than 15,000 openings. More recent data would suggest that while the number of graduate openings has remained fairly stable, the number of applicants has begun to decline. Thus, it appears that either students are becoming aware of the unfavorable odds of being admitted to graduate school, or they are reflecting the trend of the 70's toward career orientation in undergraduate school, or possibly both. It is also becoming apparent that post-graduate career opportunities in Psychology, particularly in experimental and academic areas, are becoming more limited. In any event, it is becoming clear that concern must be given to career accommodation for the hundreds of thousands of Psychology majors not destined for graduate school. The alternative is to reduce the scope of our undergraduate mission, and to train a small elite group of students in graduate-school preparatory programs. I think few people would agree that this would be either desirable or realistic.

Students majoring in undergraduate Psychology can, for convenience, be grouped into three categories:

1. Those who apply for and enter a graduate training program in Psychology.

2. Those who pursue careers and/or advanced training in areas other than Psychology.
3. Those who wish to pursue psychology-related careers at the bachelor's level.

Students in group #1 need to be assured of the strongest possible preparation for graduate school entry, including ample exposure to research experience. This point has been well emphasized in earlier presentations. For those in the second category, it is important to identify their extra-psychological interests early, in order to advise them toward appropriate minor areas relevant to their needs. Many academic fields merge nicely with Psychology in providing specified career opportunities. Business, Criminology, Special Education, Chemistry (pre-med), and Political Science (pre-law) are some examples of joint major or major/minor possibilities combined with Psychology. The point is simply that Psychology can contribute significantly toward many career patterns.

Students in the third group, those wishing a bachelor's level psychology career, are those for whom undergraduate psychology programs have a more singular responsibility. It has only been in the last few years that career or professionally oriented curricula have emerged in undergraduate Psychology departments. Even before the emergence of such programs, numerous surveys have demonstrated that a large number of B.A. graduates have successfully obtained satisfying employment, much of it surprisingly relevant to Psychology. These surveys appear in a variety of places, including the American Psychologist and other publications of the APA. One particularly informative APA book is entitled "The Psychology Major, Training and Employment Strategies," edited by Paul J. Woods (1979). An important recurring theme is the emergence of specialized undergraduate curricula, designed with a generalized career orientation or specialized vocational preparation. It is the avowed intention of most such programs to bridge the gap between graduate-school

preparation and career oriented students by helping students to achieve requisite skills for obtaining psychology-related employment at the bachelor's level or below. While the format of these programs varies widely, the predominant theme appears to be the application of clinical and human relationship skills. Some of the programs are based on a multiple-track concept, while others expand a single basic curriculum by the addition of requirements or electives. A number of unanswered questions immediately present themselves upon consideration of applied programs. In addition to evaluating the availability of jobs, it is important to evaluate undergraduate psychology programs themselves to ascertain whether or not they are providing skills relevant to the needs of students.

Some specific questions will be indicated, along with some initial thoughts on each. Although I've indicated my own tentative conclusions, there is insufficient data to be very confident of any assertions made at the moment. Hopefully, an exchange of ideas during the discussion period will help shed further light on the topic. Here, then, are some issues to consider:

1. Has Psychology progressed to the point that specific job skills can be taught at the bachelor's level?
2. Are undergraduate students sufficiently mature to deal with sensitive personal issues, ethically apply clinical and other procedures, and maintain confidentiality?
3. Are clinical skills those which are most in demand by prospective employers?
4. Are employment prospects enhanced by the curricular inclusion of applied skills?
5. Do students not preparing for graduate school need coursework in traditional areas such as experimental psychology, statistics, and research design?

6. If traditional psychology content is retained in addition to applied courses, do psychology requirements become excessive?

Some thoughts and observations on the above:

1. Teaching of job skills.

Certainly those persons who have proposed and developed "paraprofessional" training programs would argue that an applied technology exists which can be taught to undergraduates. I personally believe that to define such techniques narrowly in the context of preparation for specific jobs would do a tremendous disservice to students, whose vocational options would be very limited. It is very possible, however, to teach generalized skills, such as interviewing, group leadership, and behavior modification techniques, and such skills could be applicable to a wide variety of jobs. Many specific techniques will probably soon be obsolete, and it is important also to teach the foundations of new techniques to be acquired at a later date.

2. Student Maturity.

The goal of many students, and the apparent purpose of some programs, is entry into clinical service delivery occupations. It is unfortunate that we allow society and our students to perpetuate the myth that Psychology is equivalent to Clinical Psychology. If one surveys the range of employment of bachelors graduates, direct delivery of clinical services is uncommon, except under close supervision. However, some skills often associated with clinical training, such as interviewing, would be helpful assets in a variety of settings. Experience also seems to indicate that at least some undergraduate students are fully capable of learning to conduct themselves professionally and ethically. The key ingredient, however, is close individualized supervision and coursework emphasizing professional ethics. Both may be rare luxuries in an era of tight staffing and in programs oriented toward graduate training.

3. The demand for clinical skills.

Clinical skills are those most in demand only in the broadest sense. Clinical training per se is probably best left at the graduate level, with undergraduate career training more generally oriented toward those skills which also are useful in non-clinical settings. Some surveys of industrial employers, for instance, have noted the desirability of psychology majors for the breadth of their background and ability to think analytically. Most specific skills can be trained on-the-job. And it should not be forgotten that even students trained only in traditional psychology programs have some marketable skills, not the least of which is statistical analysis.

4. Enhancement of employment prospects.

Except for some specific vocational settings, surveys have not demonstrated the specific applicability of any particular applied skills toward enhancing employment prospects. The single factor which stands out time after time is prior experience with clinical or human services populations. If it is not possible to invest an applied program with faculty commitment and individualized instruction, at the very least field-experience opportunities should be available to all interested students (either as part of the curriculum or on a volunteer basis).

5. Traditional Psychology Curricula.

A very controversial topic is whether or not traditional experimental content should be required in career oriented programs. If there were pressing need to attract students, it would certainly be possible to design a curriculum emphasizing the "soft" areas of Psychology that would be very appealing to students. There are several very good reasons, however, why to do so would be highly inappropriate:

- a) Analytic thinking and methodological skills, usually associated with experimental "rigor", are two of the most desirable employment factors for Psychology majors.
- b) Without grounding in experimental methods, application of procedures, such as behavior modification techniques, can be little more than mechanical exercises.
- c) The salary and promotional ceilings for bachelor's graduates are very low. At some point it will become necessary for most to attain additional education in order to achieve job advancement. Without the necessary grounding in the fundamentals of psychology, admission to graduate programs will be nearly impossible. Graduate programs clearly value experimental coursework, and often consider applied undergraduate training to be irrelevant. There is no evidence this is likely to change in the near future.

6. The extensiveness of requirements.

If traditional psychology content is retained in a curriculum, in addition to career oriented coursework, there is a great danger that psychology requirements will become excessive, to the detriment of broad-based general education. Unless we truly believe that psychology as a major area should constitute the preponderance of a student's college education, certain compromises must be made between basic psychology and applied techniques. Unless time and resources can be directed toward applied courses, emphasis should be placed on traditional methodological coursework. Every student should have some basic research experience, in order to better understand the evolving nature of psychological applications, whether or not research per se is viewed as an occupational prerequisite.

Summary and Conclusions:

I have attempted to demonstrate that the psychology major has continued vitality and occupational relevance, whether or not specialized vocational programs are developed. Furthermore, it can be seen that efforts to launch specialized paraprofessional programs should be coupled with strong faculty commitment to provide close individualized supervision. No one is served by half-hearted exposure of students to techniques they are never trained to master. And finally, applied training, when attempted, should be broad-based, and combined with a strong general psychology component. Psychology in the long run may not be a constellation of techniques as much as it is an intellectual orientation upon which many skills can be based.